Postcolonial Perspectives on Global Production Networks: Insights from Flower Valley in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper proposes dialogue between postcolonial theory and the analytical frameworks of global value chains (GVCs) and global production networks (GPNs). It does so in order to open up more culturally-sensitive accounts of global supply networks and exporting localities than those provided by prevailing political-economic approaches. Particular focus is placed on Zein-Elabdin's (2009) postcolonial notion of economic hybridity to advance understanding of the institutional contexts shaping production networks. The value of applying this concept to GVC/GPN studies is illustrated in the case of a sustainable wildflower harvesting supply network in South Africa's Western Cape, which supplies ethically-promoted bouquets to domestic and European markets. Transnational cultural politics, including those associated with colonial encounters, are shown to shape the hybrid institutional context of this production network. It is suggested that such a perspective on institutional hybridity offers just one fruitful conversation between postcolonial approaches and GVC/GPN frameworks.

Keywords: global production networks; global value chains; postcolonial theory; South Africa

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1. Introduction

This paper brings global production network (GPN) and global value chain (GVC) approaches into dialogue with postcolonial theory. In particular, it develops a notion of economic hybridity from the work of Eiman Zein-Elabdin (2009, 2011),[1] in order to advance a more culturally-sensitive understanding than these frameworks currently provide of the institutional contexts shaping global networks of supply. A postcolonial approach has potential to highlight the complexity and indeterminacy of the cultural/social/political contexts through which economic relations operate, and where economic categories and theories are created and applied. Innovative perspectives on the nature of global trading networks and their effects might be brought into view by a postcolonial sensibility. Rather than proposing a set of programmatic statements and a new analytical framework, we suggest there is critical ground to be gained from blending carefully some of the insights from postcolonial and GVC/GPN approaches. We illustrate this in the paper through the particular project of re-thinking the institutional contexts of GVCs/GPNs through a postcolonial notion of hybridity. First, in order to anchor the case for a postcolonial approach, the paper begins with a vignette relating to our case study of Flower Valley in South Africa.

On March 16th 2011, flower pickers, conservationists and academics gathered for a review of sustainable harvesting practice at Flower Valley—a 580 hectare farm on the western edge of

[1]While Zein-Elabdin (2009) acknowledges that she does not construct a tightly-defined concept of economic hybridity, she nonetheless argues for its analytical potential and develops a particular notion of it in her analysis of African economies.

the Agulhas Plain in Western Cape Province (see Figure 1).[2] The farm is located within the Cape Floral Kingdom—the smallest and richest of the world's six floral kingdoms, and home to an estimated 9,600 plant species known locally as *fynbos* ('fine leaved bush'). *Fynbos* flower farming is a main component of the agricultural sector in the Cape Floral Kingdom, with both cultivated and wild flowers harvested for domestic and export markets. Flower Valley farm is owned by the Flower Valley Conservation Trust (FVCT), a registered non-profit organisation since 1999 pioneering the sustainable harvesting of wild *fynbos* in the Western Cape. Sustainably harvested wildflower bouquets are supplied to a nearby pack-shed, Fynbloem[3], which in turn supplies bouquets to retailers. Its most significant customer is the UK retailer, Marks and Spencer plc. Other buyers are Sainsbury and Tesco in the UK and Pick'n'Pay in South Africa. These corporate buyers play a powerful role in influencing bouquet design, distribution, pricing structures and payment terms, but in ways that need to be sensitive to the *fynbos* conservation agenda.

[Figure 1 about here].

The Review of Sustainable Harvesting Practice in 2011 involved the observation of two picking teams—one team from Flower Valley and another from a neighbouring farm who had undergone less sustainable harvesting training—as they worked to meet an order generated for the purposes of assessing whether principles taught in FVCT's sustainable harvesting training have become embedded within pickers' daily practices. Key elements of

[2] This review was led by one of the authors as part of a 3-year research project investigating ethical production in South Africa.

[3] While Fynbloem is the current export packing facility in the Riviersonderend Valley that packs and distributes sustainably harvested wildflowers, at the time of the research the pack-shed used was Fynsa, a private company that endeavoured to open local and overseas markets for sustainably-harvested wild *fynbos* bouquets between 2004 and 2013.

this training include: awareness of vulnerable plant species and avoidance of harvesting those most endangered; guidelines to pick only up to 50% of a plant's annual flower heads and to cut at an angle of 45 degrees; avoidance of damage to plants; and responsibilities to leave the area litter-free. These elements, which form core components of FVCT's Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice,[4] have to be followed by pickers in the context of very strict demands by the pack-shed in response to retailers' stipulations about flower volumes, varieties and quality. Observations of picking practices were made during the morning of the review by FVCT representatives, academics and representatives of CapeNature, the Western Cape regulatory authority responsible for issuing licences for harvesting *fynbos*. After lunch, observations were discussed. Overall, picking practices were viewed to be very good. Of 37 observations, there were only three examples of non-compliance with the code, all from the team outside of Flower Valley and suggested to be rectifiable with effective communication and advice from supervisors. However, what the exercise also crucially highlighted was the tension between the Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice and retail buyer requirements; tensions embodied in the work of the pickers themselves. In the plenary session it was reported that one entire consignment harvested would have been rejected by the pack-shed, not because of any problems with sustainable picking, but because it failed to meet buyers' criteria. FVCT's Conservation Manager remarked in the plenary that:

> "If you look at the market criteria, they specifically ask for white flowers. If you apply that criterion strictly it means that one whole consignment will be thrown away. The question is how we can manage that scenario. There will be no loss to the pack-shed if they throw it out, but there will be loss from a biodiversity perspective" (16th March, 2011).

[4] The current Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice can be found at http://www.ppsa.co.za/standards/ (accessed 25/07/14).

Academics, CapeNature managers and FVCT representatives agreed that there were tensions between commercial demands regarding bouquet composition and sustainable harvesting. GVC/GPN perspectives would understand the dynamics and impacts of this *fynbos* production network in terms of a buyer-driven chain or network, co-ordinated through practices of relational contracting between retail customers and farm managers, and generating economic development gains for the farm and its workers by their capture of value from the management and export of this resource. Power and authority in the network would be seen from these perspectives to lie with lead firms (the retailers), and the observed tensions in the field and pack-shed would be explained in terms of this lead firm power. In other words, the theorisation would be largely firm-centred. However, we suggest that to understand more fully the challenges and tensions experienced by various actors in Flower Valley there is a need for more culturally-nuanced and geographically-sensitive perspectives than those currently dominating the literature on commodity chains. There is scope, for example, to advance conceptualisation of the influence of institutional complexity in the Western Cape region, the histories and politics of conservation in the Cape Floral Kingdom and the cultural politics of *fynbos* commodification shaping buyer demand itself, in order to de-centre overly firm-centric views of GVC/GPN governance. This paper advances such perspectives by bringing a postcolonial approach into conversation with GVC and GPN frameworks.

GVC and GPN frameworks, as a set of linked approaches explaining globally-stretched supply chains, have gained significance over the past decade. Developed from earlier models of global commodity chains (GCCs) (Gereffi, 1994), they present powerful (and complementary) tools for understanding the governance and economic development impacts of global networks of supply (see Coe et al., 2004; Gereffi et al., 2005; Henderson et al.,

2002). However, in pursuit of more sophisticated frameworks, which aim both to keep pace with changing political-economic realities and to capture analytical fields hitherto confined to the edges of their explanatory reach (Coe et al., 2008), there are ongoing attempts at theoretical refinement. This paper contributes to this endeavour by responding to two related calls from within this intellectual project: first, to incorporate 'the cultural' more deeply into these frameworks; second, to sensitise their explanatory accounts more effectively to the role of institutional contexts in shaping supply network dynamics. With attention paid to sites of export production, in particular, the aim of the paper is to advance cultural-economic approaches to understanding institutional environments by considering postcolonial perspectives. This is achieved by adopting Zein-Elabdin's (2009) postcolonial notion of economic hybridity to understand the cultural politics of institutional contexts.

While a postcolonial interpretation (influenced by post-structural cultural theory) of GVCs/GPNs (influenced by institutional economics and Marxian political economy) may appear initially to be at theoretical odds, the paper proposes a constructive dialogue in order to foster consideration of the significance of cultural influence within production networks. Moreover, a postcolonial approach can problematise and unsettle prevailing understandings of arguably narrowly-defined economic governance in supplying localities. We suggest that not only has GVC/GPN research much to gain from the critical insights of postcolonial theory, but also postcolonial approaches might, in response to some of their critics (see Pollard et al., 2011), address issues of economy more directly through an engagement with GVC/GPN insights.

The paper first outlines the case for a deeper consideration of institutional context and cultural influence in GVC and GPN analysis. Second, the potential of postcolonial

approaches for understanding institutions and culture in GVC/GPN research, as well as ethical trade in particular, is discussed. The postcolonial-economic concept used in the paper—Zein-Elabdin's (2009) notion of economic hybridity—is then outlined and brought into dialogue specifically with the GPN conceptual framework and its theorisation of embeddedness[5], before its application is briefly illustrated through the example of institutional hybridity in South African sustainable wildflower harvesting. This case study, introduced in the vignette above, is part of a wider project involving 62 interviews between August 2010 and December 2011 with stakeholders in wildflower harvesting and conservation, including trustees at FVCT, environmental NGOs, commercial stakeholders, farmers and landowners, pickers and pack-shed workers.[6]

2. The case for institutional and cultural perspectives in GVC and GPN research

The GVC approach develops highly firm-centred understandings of governance and upgrading (Gereffi et al., 2005; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005; Gibbon et al., 2008; Neilson and Pritchard, 2009). This is a now well-rehearsed critique connected with the framework's distancing from political-economic foundations.[7] In response, there are calls to re-focus on the agency of wider institutional environments in shaping patterns of power and authority in global supply chains (Bair, 2005). While Humphrey and Schmitz's (2001) recognition of

[5] Although theoretical focus is placed on the GPN approach at this point, the paper's arguments overall speak to a postcolonial engagement with both GPN and GVC approaches.

[6] 52 interviews were conducted in and around the Agulhas Plain with 55 different informants. These include four FVCT staff members, two CapeNature employees, 15 wildflower pickers, 12 pack-shed workers, two pack-shed managers, eight suppliers, four FVCT Trustees, eight external stakeholders (including conservation NGOs and retail buyers in the Western Cape). 10 further interviews with 10 different corporate and civil society informants were also conducted in South Africa and the UK, which directly informed this case study.

[7] While the earlier GCC approach of the mid-1990s began to move away from the macro-level political-economic analysis associated with world systems theory, the GVC framework made an even more significant break from it by adopting transaction cost economics in pursuit of explaining micro-level inter-firm governance (Bair, 2005; Gereffi et al, 2005). However, alongside our sharper focus on GPN perspectives, we maintain engagement with GVC approaches rather than GCC throughout the paper given that the former has effectively superseded the latter within the more recent literature on global supply chains.

institutional *mechanisms* influencing GVC governance is acknowledged, Bair (2005: 168) argues more radically for "…studying how chains are articulated within and through the larger social, cultural and political-economic environments in which they operate". This can incorporate rules and regulations such as international trade policy and national and regional regulations, as well as 'softer' societal norms, routines, values and rituals (Neilson and Pritchard, 2009).

The call for greater explanatory significance afforded to institutions in GVC analysis is mirrored by debates in economic geography and, specifically, their articulation in the GPN framework. Noting a clear difference between GVC and GPN conceptualisation of institutional agency and culture, Hess and Yeung (2006: 1198) suggest that "…culture and non-firm institutions are—with the exception of the GPN framework—still treated as externalities in much of the existing conceptual literature on transnational systems of production". By contrast, Neilson and Pritchard (2009: 56) see institutional environments and value chains as tightly interwoven, recognising "… that institutional arrangements and governance structures are co-produced and in a state of perpetual dynamic transformation".

Through a GPN approach, the role of institutions has been implicit in a framework viewing production as embedded in complex networks and territories. Emphasising the degree to which cross-border trade is driven by 'lead firms', but also recognising its embeddedness in different places and trans-scalar spaces of governance, the GPN approach emphasises "the interplay of power, value, and embeddedness dynamics at and across different spatial scales" (Coe and Hess, 2005: 457; Coe et al., 2004; Henderson et al., 2002). It has prioritised a concern with the impacts of GPNs on local and regional economic development through

processes of value creation, enhancement and capture when global supply networks are "strategically coupled" with localities (Coe et al., 2004: 469).

Emphasis placed on institutional environments in recent GVC and GPN approaches is linked, in part, to a call for deeper consideration of the cultural (seen as the non-economic) realm in shaping supply network dynamics, governance and development outcomes (Coe et al., 2008; Hudson, 2008). As Neilson and Pritchard (2009: 9) argue, "An institutional perspective recognises that the progress, conduct and outcomes of value chain restructuring are steeped in the weights of history, culture and geography; the 'stickiness of places'". Schools of thought shaping recent GVC and GPN understandings of cultural influence have tended to derive from heterodox economics and heterodox political economy, including institutional economics (North, 1990), evolutionary economics (Hodgson, 1993), new economic sociology (Granovetter, 1985) and cultural political economy (Jessop and Sum, 2001; Hudson, 2008). In various ways, these approaches engage with culture as sets of collective norms, routines and values influencing economic activity and pathways. However, Amin and Thrift (2003) challenge such approaches by proposing a cultural-economy perspective that views the spheres of economy (concerning resource production, allocation and distribution) and culture (concerning identities and life worlds) as inseparable, both empirically and theoretically. As demonstrated subsequently, a postcolonial perspective fits with this ontological challenge to the culture-economy dualism and presents innovative ways of (re)imagining the manner in which global supply networks are at once cultural and economic.

3. The case for postcolonial perspectives on GVCs/GPNs and ethical trade

GVC and GPN approaches have a shared imperative with postcolonial approaches in breaking down the North-South binary that has tended to frame discussions of global trade.

However, postcolonial approaches raise some conceptual and methodological issues for GVC and GPN frameworks, particularly in their use of the language of economic development and value capture, which tend to sideline diverse ethical values, different economic languages and lived experiences of economic change. Engagement with postcolonial approaches requires a more thorough de-centring of western theories, an acknowledgement of plural and hybrid economic forms, the cultural embeddedness of ideas of economy and critique of knowledge flows. The intersection of heterodox economics, geography and cultural theory provides the terrain upon which a more searching and rigorous engagement has begun to emerge around the notion of 'postcolonial economy' (Pollard et al., 2011), whereby materiality and discourse are seen as mutually constitutive. This engagement, in turn, might enrich geographical conceptualisation of export production sites. The postcolonial imperative to confront Eurocentrism implies a need to challenge the ontological separation of culture and economy, and anticipates Amin and Thrift's (2003: xxi) call for studies of cultural economy to explore "indigenous knowledges, non-Western moral orders . . . and alternative modernities" by foregrounding understandings of economy from the global South.

While there are clear synergies between cultural-economic and postcolonial approaches, the latter also has an implicit, if not always explicit, political and ethical focus. This is in part because of its interrogation of the constitutive relation between imperialism, colonialism and global capitalism (Spivak, 1987; Said, 1993; Chatterjee, 1996), but also an imperative to contest western cultural authority. As Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004: 6) argue, this contestation is paramount in the space of economic analysis as it is "the area where the primary cultural precepts of European modernity take material effect and translate into concrete political interventions". In contesting the centrality of European modernity within economic models, postcolonial theory involves a critique of 'development' as based

fundamentally in Eurocentric ideas and practices (Kapoor, 2008), problematises the Eurocentrism of political economy (Gidwani, 2008; Wainwright, 2008) and, in challenging the ways in which particular, western conceptions of economy become universalised, exposes the ways in which the significance of culture is erased in certain contexts and emphasised in others (Chakrabarty, 2000).

While GVC/GPN approaches posit a more sophisticated understanding of production networks than those deploying a global North-South binary model, unlike postcolonial approaches they do not necessarily require an active engagement with ideas from those 'other' places to which economic theory is often blind. Economic theory still unconsciously universalises the western parochial, and thus 'non-western' economies are seen in terms of "a lack, an absence, an incompleteness that translates into an 'inadequacy"' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 32) or, at best, are reduced to 'varieties of capitalism' (Pollard et al., 2009). While economic studies of transnational and ethical trade, neoliberalism, alternative finance, commodity chains, and so forth, incorporate a multitude of case studies covering spaces within the global South, these tend to be understood through conceptual frameworks that are rooted in western theorisation, including GVC and GPN frameworks. A postcolonial approach challenges hegemonic discourses and captures more multiple and situated accounts of economy than those that have tended to dominate the literature.

Both ethical and fair trade are based in standards frequently devised in the global North, which are assumed to be universal and exportable to the global South. While responding to inequities in global supply networks is desirable, ethical interventions emanating from the global North have a tendency to construct agencies within the global North as 'ethical' actors, while the terrain of production in the global South is constructed as 'unethical' and requiring

external intervention and regulation (Freidberg, 2003). This ignores the fact that countries like South Africa, for example, have comprehensive labour laws (if not always the capacity to implement these, especially within the agricultural sector), plus a constitutional commitment to more radical ethical issues, such as economic empowerment. In addition, ethical interventions are often seen to be driven by Northern ethical concerns with minimal consideration of socio-economic realities in the South (Dolan, 2010), though more proactive roles in ethical trade are increasingly being played by Southern actors.

Studies have addressed how the discourses and legacies of colonialism influence export production. This is particularly evident in culturally-inflected analyses of ethical trade (Dolan, 2005; Freidberg, 2003; Neilson and Pritchard, 2009, 2010). Colonial imaginaries and moralities apparent both in the sphere of consumption and through corporate ethical codes applied to suppliers in the global South are significant themes through which 'the colonial' is acknowledged in research concerning GVCs and GPNs (Cook and Harrison, 2003). Alongside this, some research into global commodity chains takes a more historical perspective sensitive to the role of colonial pasts and cultural politics (Bair and Werner, 2011; Besky, 2010; Hough, 2011; Robins, 1999). However, there is space to link conceptually and more explicitly postcolonial approaches with GPN/GVC frameworks in order to re-think the complexity of cross-cultural values that are part of ethical codes. Accepting that there are many possibilities for theoretically connecting postcolonial critique with political-economic understanding of global trading links, and that a comprehensive framework of these connections is neither desirable nor within the scope of this paper, the following section develops just one possible way in which a postcolonial perspective might be brought into dialogue with GVC/GPN approaches.

4. Understanding institutional contexts of GPNs through notions of hybridity

The work of Zein-Elabdin (2009, 2011)—one of just a few economists explicitly advancing engagement of heterodox economics with postcolonial approaches—is particularly instructive for the possibilities of blending postcolonial and GVC/GPN theory. Her identification of both explicit and implicit "economic moments" in the work of three postcolonial theorists—Said's (1979) acknowledgement of the role of economic theory in the imperialist project of Orientialism, Spivak's (1987) interrogation of value and Bhabha's (1985, 1994) notion of hybridity challenging the culture/economy dualism—offer helpful starting points for envisioning economic relations through a postcolonial lens (Zein-Elabdin, 2011: 44).

Advancing a postcolonial perspective on GVC/GPNs specifically, we turn to Zein-Elabdin's (2009, 2011) engagement with Bhabha's hybridity concept and its potential to revise notions of culture in institutional economic analysis. Zein-Elabdin (2009) presents a detailed critique of the denial and marginalisation of culture in different economic schools of thought, arguing that of the heterodox economic approaches institutional economics makes most room for its consideration. Explaining that new institutional economics tends to bracket off culture, seeing it as subordinate to individualising imperatives of utility-maximisation, she favours old institutional approaches (and more recent iterations of these, e.g. North, 1990) and their acknowledgement of the economy's "cultural embeddedness" (Zein-Elabdin, 2009: 1155). While she recognises the cultural modernism of such institutionalist approaches, associated with the privileging of European values, Zein-Elabdin nonetheless suggests that there is space for engagement between such perspectives and postcolonial theory.

The preference for old institutional economics resonates with the approach taken by Neilson and Pritchard (2009), who arguably go furthest in building theories of institutions

(concerning rules, norms and values, as well as concrete organisations) into GVC/GPN accounts of supply chain embeddedness. However, given that neither Neilson and Pritchard, nor other GVC/GPN scholars, explicitly address the cultural modernism of their institutional approaches, there is room to take this theory-building much further by developing a postcolonial perspective on the institutional environments shaping GVC/GPNs. We focus on this by highlighting, first, Zein-Elabdin's notion of economic hybridity adapted from Bhabha's philosophies and, second, by working this into the GPN approach. We single out the GPN approach at this point, given its more explicit treatment of spatial complexity through questions of geographical embeddedness and Hess and Yeung's (2006) assertion that it goes further than the GVC approach in acknowledging the centrality of cultural norms and practices to supply network dynamics.

Zein-Elabdin (2009) acknowledges that, in contrast to the more explicit 'economic moments' in the works of Said and Spivak, Bhabha's writings are not renowned for their treatment of economy and materiality. However, she argues that Bhabha's writings on colonial discourse and his notion of hybridity have potential to challenge the culture/economy binary and to capture critically the ways in which economic relations are continually constructed and reconstructed out of 'in-between' or 'third' spaces. Bhabha (1994: 173) is concerned with the in-between spaces of colonial encounters, recognising culture as "translational", in part through the practices of subaltern groups. Acknowledging that there are neither pure economies nor pure cultures to blend, postcolonial economies viewed through the lens of hybridity are seen always to involve "... situations of multiple cultural intersections, producing a continuum of different lifeways" (Zein-Elabdin, 2011: 47). Such a view critically revises notions of culture found in traditional institutionalist accounts that tend to privilege European values. In the context of transnational economic spaces, "a hybrid

reflects blending and fusion of institutions, habits and values as a result of cultural borrowing and movement across time" (ibid.: 1161). This achieves an unsettling of the cultural modernism associated with much institutional economic analysis, including that represented in recent GPN studies. While Bhabha's (1994: 173) theorisation of a "hybrid location of cultural value—the transnational as the translational" is elaborated mainly from literary perspectives of the subaltern, Zein-Elabdin (2009, 2011) suggests that the notion of economic hybridity can also be used to think through other kinds of cross-cultural fusion and to challenge the culture/economy and tradition/modernity binaries in many different contexts.

Pinning down how this concept of hybridity might more specifically be worked into accounts of the institutional contexts shaping GPNs, Zein-Elabdin's suggestion that there are multiple kinds of economic hybridity at work can help further. The one she develops in her own brief analysis of African economies is defined by "... a person or group's ability to combine multiple, even contradictory, codes of values and rationales of economic decision and practice" (2009: 1162). Although she applies this to notions of economy more broadly, implicitly she connects this concept of hybridity to institutions. We suggest, therefore, that it is possible to use the term 'institutional hybridity' to refer to the "multiple cultural currents" (Zein-Elabdin, 2009: 1160) shaping both the collective identities and shared perspectives of particular organisations and also the wider norms and values bound up in GPNs.

This idea of institutional hybridity advances understanding of the important cultural-political dimensions of what the GPN framework currently represents as relations between different forms of embeddedness. The GPN framework originally incorporated two notions of embeddedness—'territorial' to capture the "anchoring in different places (from the nation-state to the local level)" of GPNs (Henderson et al, 2002: 452) and 'network' to address the

structure and stability of transnational connectivity embodied in a GPN. Hess (2004: 176) introduced a third dimension—societal embeddedness—concerning the "genetic code" of firm and non-firm actors formed by the social and institutional contexts from which they originate. The postcolonial-inspired notion of institutional hybridity revises existing GPN theorisation of institutional environments, which are currently founded upon concepts of embeddedness, in three key ways. First, it challenges the idea of three separable types of embeddedness, given that places are viewed through the lens of hybridity as always and already being made up of multiple, cross-cultural connections and flows. Second, it challenges GPN tendencies to view globally-stretched institutional influences through the lens of network embeddedness, which has tended to prioritise the transnational corporate structures of lead firms. Instead, the lens of institutional hybridity illuminates multiple cultural intersections that form not only the firm *and* non-firm actors central to GPNs, but also wider norms and values (including, but not limited to, those associated with colonial encounters). Third, the notion of institutional hybridity revises Hess's (2004) particular reading of the societal embeddedness of GPNs by challenging the DNA metaphor used to capture the influence of firms' and other organisations' rootedness in some kind of 'original', rather than hybridised, social contexts.

We therefore suggest a revision of GPN understandings of institutional influence by replacing the concept of embeddedness with a postcolonial perspective on institutional hybridity. Notions of embeddedness used in the new economic sociology associated with Granovetter (1985) are suggested to perpetuate the culture/economy dualism (Krippner, 2001), which Bair (2008) argues in turn has transferred into GPN understandings of global economic networks. Replacing concepts of embeddedess with those of institutional hybridity retains recognition of a GPN comprised of transnational connections linking production and consumption, but

attends to the multiple cultural flows making up the institutional dynamics of both concrete organisations operating in the GPN and the values shaping it. By asserting the notion of institutional hybridity as a core concept worthy of analysis in GPN studies, current political-economic theorisation of culture as sets of norms, values and practices external to, but affecting, the operations of a GPN is advanced by instead acknowledging that hybridised values are always and already a *part* of continually changing GPNs. We therefore suggest incorporating into GPN analysis Zein-Elabdin's (2011: 1156) more specific, postcolonial theorisation of culture "... as a broadly shared, incomplete, unpredictable, historically-specific social frame of reference that contains different practices and ideas, including economy and economies". This definition develops Neilson and Pritchard's (2009) institutional approach by asserting the historical specificity and unpredictability of cross-cultural norms, including those arising from colonial relations, which are internal to GPN pathways.

5. Global production networks and institutional hybridity: shaping ethical production in Flower Valley

Returning to sustainable wildflower harvesting in the Western Cape, which prompted the vignette at the start of the paper, we briefly illustrate the value of re-thinking GPNs through the notion of institutional hybridity. A nuanced critique of sustainable harvesting is developed, which acknowledges that "[t]he postcolonial, as the cross-cultural outcome of [an] historical process of domination, is a *hybrid* state of mutual constitution, irreversibly inflected by the colonial encounter" (Zein-Elabdin, 2011: 1159). In Section 5.1 we address the ways in which the colonial encounter has shaped the emergence and dynamics of sustainable wildflower production networks, and in Section 5.2 we highlight the institutional hybridity bound up in contemporary ethical codes governing the production networks.

5.1 The emergence of global production networks for sustainably harvested *fynbos*: the significance of the colonial encounter

The current production network for sustainably harvested *fynbos* bouquets connects eleven suppliers of wildflowers (including the Flower Valley farm owned by FVCT) on the Agulhas Plain of the Western Cape with UK corporate retail chains, Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury and Tesco, and the South African retailer Pick'n'Pay (Flower Valley Conservation Trust, 2013). This production network forms part of a much larger South African *fynbos* export industry, including wildflowers harvested outside of FVCT's sustainable harvesting programme and the commercial cultivation of *fynbos* for domestic and overseas markets. In the case of Marks and Spencer—the major buyer of sustainably harvested *fynbos*—the appeal of these wildflower bouquets is both aesthetic and connected to its identity as a retailer of sustainable products since the 2007 launch of its *Plan A* corporate sustainability strategy.

Marks and Spencer's luxury, sustainably-harvested Cape Flora bouquets at the time of writing retail online for £25 and in-store for £13. Given the connection of sustainable wildflower harvesting to the conservation of the Cape Floral Kingdom, the bouquet counts as one of the retailer's products (57% of its product lines) carrying a *Plan A* quality (Marks and Spencer, 2014). All four corporate retailers of the sustainably harvested wildflower bouquets, but in particular Marks and Spencer, play a role in the design and composition of the bouquets as well as setting price points, payment terms, distribution requirements and ethical standards concerning labour and environmental protection (Interviews with FVCT Marketing Director, 7th and 24th September 2010; supplier, 20th September 2010 and pack-shed Managing Director, 4th February 2011). As explained above, GVC and GPN perspectives would therefore view this production network as largely buyer-driven and co-ordinated through practices of relational contracting between retail customers and farm and

pack-shed managers. A GPN perspective would also highlight the economic development gains generated for the suppliers on the Agulhas Plain, as value is captured by the export of this resource.[8] Although territorial embeddedness in the political-economic landscape of the Western Cape would be recognised, the significance of culture (values, identities and tastes) would be viewed at best as influential, but nonetheless external to the production network. By contrast, notions of institutional hybridity bring the cultural politics of both production and markets more clearly into view, theorising them as always and already inside the dynamics of the production network and its governance. More specifically, a historically-sensitive view also recognises the irreversible influence of the colonial encounter (Zein-Elabdin, 2011). Such perspectives do not have to replace completely GVC/GPN explanations of lead firm authority. Rather, they can advance understanding of the more complex, historically-shaped power relations at work in production networks so heavily influenced by affluent markets.

An appreciation of the role of the colonial encounter reveals how markets for *fynbos* and their problematic relationship with conservation have been constructed. It is also revealing of some of the values and politics that continue to influence the governance of contemporary production networks. Environmental historian, Lance van Sittert (2003), provides an account of how the construction of the Cape Floral Kingdom itself, so central to FVCT's current conservation work and the environmental credentials endorsed by Marks and Spencer, is embedded in colonial power relations. His account seeks to reveal what Pooley (2012) sees as 'lost histories' of *fynbos*, which in Zein-Elabdin's terms can be cast into shadow by the

[8] Although small in scale, sustainable wildflower harvesting generates employment for around 150 workers, either picking on neighbouring farms or working in the pack-shed. FVCT also has become a *cause célèbre* among the donor community, receiving financial support from regional, national and international conservation organisations for the development of its sustainable harvesting programme.

cultural modernism of dominant political-economic accounts of wildflower supply networks. Such historical narratives can make more visible some of the hybridised, cross-cultural strategies and practices shaping present forms of sustainable harvesting. Crucially in this case, a postcolonial perspective reveals the role of the colonial encounter as pivotal to the commoditisation of indigenous Western Cape flora.

Both the conservation of, and the creation of markets for, *fynbos* are based on the notion and understanding of the Cape Floral Kingdom, which has its roots in British imperialism, elite colonial settler politics and their anxieties about identity. van Sittert (2003) provides a narrative of how the Cape Floral Kingdom was labelled as such by Cape botanists (consisting largely of white colonial elites in Cape Town) in the early twentieth century. Against the backdrop of a colonial urban middle class elite more interested until the 1890s in 'exotic' European flora, van Sittert (2003) explains how their identification with indigenous flowers of the Cape became both ideological, in terms of providing them with a sense of regional identity, and practical, in terms of protecting their own land use against competing uses by the poor. A market for indigenous wildflowers had developed in Cape Town since the 1880s, represented by the flower sellers of Adderley Street, which extended also to Johannesburg and overseas. These flowers were harvested for the most part by the marginalised working classes (many of them women and children), who effectively picked the flowers from the commons and commodified them. However, such trade was seen by colonial elites in the Cape at the time to pose a threat to the indigenous flowers and a series of attempts were made to regulate wildflower harvesting, beginning with Wildflower Protection Acts (van Sittert, 2003). The market for *fynbos* flowers thus emerged out of both the knowledge and labour of working class people and metropolitan tastes, which engendered a taste for 'charismatic species' such as proteas and pincushions—the same species that are the focal flowers in UK

and South African retailers' contemporary bouquets. As the Marketing Director for FCVT reflected on Marks and Spencer's *Cape Flora* bouquets, "If there is no signature flower it will not sell" (Interview, 24th September 2010).

van Sittert (2003: 121) goes on to explain how Cape botany continued to be dominated by amateur botanists as a "profoundly colonial discipline" after the Cape colony became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910. As political power moved to the Afrikaner north, Cape botany and its particular version of conservation protecting the land use of elites ran the risk of isolation. In response, it sought wider audiences for the wildflowers within the region through avenues such as the Kirstenbosch botanical garden and associated public educational work, as well as with the British public and imperial botanical organisations. At the same time, van Sittert documents how regulation of wildflower harvesting in the interests of the middle class elites continued. This regulation had the effect of banning the harvesting and sale of prohibited species of flowers by the poor, but protecting landowners and the harvesting of wildflowers by the urban middles classes for educational programmes, exhibitions and display in private homes, hotels and restaurants. The valuing of *fynbos* by colonial elites and the urban middle classes through the first part of the twentieth century was thus privileged over any cultural significance and economic value wildflowers held for the poor.

Middelmann (2012) documents the growth in overseas markets for *fynbos* through the 1960s and 1970s before a subsequent decline due to European economic sanctions during apartheid. From the mid to late-1990s, overseas markets expanded again within a broader context of globalization and national economic empowerment initiatives. It was within this context of

post-apartheid economic development through global trade that the UK NGO, Fauna and Flora International, set up FVCT "in the heart of the threatened Cape Floral Kingdom" (D'Alton, 2010). Initially, FVCT was involved in both the conservation of *fynbos* and marketing and sales of sustainably harvested bouquets to European retailers, but the roles were split in 2004 when the pack-shed at the time, Fynsa, took control of commercial operations. Through Fynsa's focus on growing overseas markets, Marks and Spencer became the key buyer of its bouquets, harvested increasingly according to FVCT's Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice. This code, under continual development with regional Western Cape conservation organisations, is the cornerstone of the Cape Flora bouquet's environmental credentials, which are so significant to Marks and Spencer and its *Plan A* strategies. Thus, not only do contemporary consumer preferences for focal flowers such as proteas and pincushions resonate with their commodification in the early twentieth century by metropolitan Western Cape elites, but also current forms of conservation and sustainability underpinning retailers' ethical credentials connect strongly to the protection of the Cape Floral Kingdom, labeled as such by colonial Cape botanists. This does not negate the notion of the network as being to some extent buyer-driven, but rather it problematises the firm-centric and weak historical understanding of this driven-ness in prevailing GCV/GPN accounts.

5.2 Institutional hybridity, FVCT and contemporary ethical codes for sustainably harvested *fynbos*

Focusing on FVCT we return to Zein-Elabdin's (2011: 1162) particular understanding of economic hybridity concerning "a person or group's ability to combine multiple, even contradictory, codes of values and rationales of economic decision and practice". In

particular, we explore how FVCT and the ethical codes for sustainable harvesting and labour conditions sit at the nexus of multiple cross-cultural norms and values that influence the dynamics of GPN governance in ways that cannot solely be explained by current GVC/GPN firm-centric notions of buyer power.

The sustainable harvesting production network for *fynbos* bouquets, although heavily shaped by lead firms in the form of corporate retail buyers, is governed by a very diverse set of norms and values that are not simply reducible to firm-level imperatives and corporate standards. Moreover, these norms and values are themselves in perpetual transformation, as well as being borne out of long histories of cross-cultural relations as explained above. In what follows, we briefly illustrate the multiple values driving the *fynbos* production network with respect both to the Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice and to labour conditions, and demonstrate the ways in which they derive not only from powerful corporate buyers, but also from the complexities of Western Cape conservation networks and changing South African politics.

While Marks and Spencer endorses as part of its *Plan A* policies the conservation work underpinning FVCT's sustainable harvesting programme, it is by no means driving it. Rather, the programme derives from FVCT itself and its translation of a wide range of Western Cape botanical and conservation projects. This is because FVCT not only owns one of the farms supplying sustainably harvested wildflowers, but it also operates as a standard-setter through its authorship and promotion of the Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice. FVCT has been working since the 1990s with botanists, conservationists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to improve conservation of the *fynbos* on the Agulhas Plain. With backing from South African organisations such as the National Botanical

Institute and multi-lateral agencies such as the Global Environment Facility, the Flower Valley farm and some of its neighbours has become an experimental site for the development of the Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice, ensuring *inter alia* that flower picking rates allow sufficient time for plant rejuvenation. This has been part of a regional initiative—the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative—since 2003. The regulatory authority, CapeNature, grants harvesting permits on the basis of research into the dynamics of *fynbos* ecology underpinning the Code of Practice (Interview with the Conservation Services Manager, CapeNature, 25th January 2011). In this way, improvements in sustainable harvesting are shaped by the regional institutional context of Cape botany and conservation, irreversibly influenced by colonial encounter, as well as being simultaneously shaped by the neoliberal drive since the end of apartheid to increase South African participation in global markets.

FVCT's strategic decision to promote sustainable wildflower harvesting via market-based pathways thus reflects observations in South Africa regarding the hybridisation of locally-specific articulations of conservation with neoliberal forms of conservation through which natural resources have been increasingly commoditised (Buscher and Dressler, 2012; King, 2009). Such institutional hybridisation would be marginalised in firm-centred GVC and GPN accounts, and yet it is central to the governance of this production network. As a representative of FVCT's Board of Trustees explains, overseas retailers' product quality and sustainability standards *and* localised conservation criteria must be met by suppliers:

> "It's not an either-or. You need to comply. At Fynsa we can't have a substandard product because it's got an 'environmentally picked' stamp on it. It must compete with any other product that is presented to the consumer in terms of floral bouquets. It must compete with the best and it must have the 'green' stamp on it" (Interview, 7th September 2010).

Returning to the issues highlighted in the vignette at the beginning of the paper, the ways in which FVCT and the suppliers of sustainably harvested *fynbos* combine and implement the diverse standards of Western Cape conservation and transnational commercial expectations are embodied in the work of the pickers and packers on the farms, as well as in managerial strategies. The quotes below from a Fynsa packer and a Flower Valley farm picker respectively illustrate how the labour of sustainable wildflower harvesting for overseas markets combines the demands of *both* retailers and Cape conservation organisations:

> "You must cut [the stem] at a 45 degree angle or it will kill the branch. We have learnt a lot of these things over the years. Flowers with longest stems are ones you want. You must choose flowers that are well suited to the bouquet, good flowers. We advise each other in the team" (Interview with a packer at Fynsa packshed, 20th Sept 2010).

> "When you cut, you cut at an angle, not straight. When there are five [flowers on a plant], you cut two and leave three. When there are ten, you cut five. You have to look for straight stems and to look at the shape of the flowers. We cut only the straight ones because the people here [at the pack-shed] only want straight ones. When you pick, don't pick old ones. We cut orange, pink and green pincushions [focal flowers]" (Interview with Flower Valley Farm Picker, 22nd Sept 2010).

These interview extracts show that workers are simultaneously working to meet commercial and conservation demands, picking and packing the highest quality focal flowers for the retailers while also complying with the Sustainable Harvesting Code of Practice in terms of cutting angles and the avoidance of over-picking. Some interviewees reported occasional tensions between market and conservation requirements, for example regarding stem lengths and harvesting volumes, which are continually negotiated at managerial and worker levels. It is pertinent to recognise that failure of farms to meet local conservation codes, as well as product quality standards, poses an element of reputational risk for the retailers. These tensions are reducible neither to firm-level demands, nor to conservation practice shaped by colonial encounter. Rather they result from a fusion of both pressures (and the multiple

values underpinning them), which we suggest is brought more clearly into view through an appreciation of institutional hybridity.

In addition to the tensions between commercial demands and ecological concerns, FVCT is also working with the local suppliers of sustainably harvested *fynbos* to comply with labour standards set by a combination of overseas and local actors. Initially labour standards within the sustainable harvesting production network were implemented through WIETA (the Agricultural Ethical Trade Initiative, South Africa), a Western Cape-based body that provides auditing services concerned with improving agricultural working environments in line with both South African regulations and ILO conventions. More recently, the Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA), of which Marks and Spencer is a part, has sought to set labour and environmental standards in the country's agricultural and horticultural sectors, including farms and pack-sheds. This initiative brings together a wide range of global retailers and South African growers' associations in order to align the international standards and tools developed in the prominent Global Social Compliance Programme with elements of South African law, the country's Skills Development Act, Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment and already-existing ethical codes championed by organisations such as WIETA. Both GVC and GPN conceptual frameworks would emphasise the power of retailers, in particular, in shaping such ethical initiatives and their influence. However, while it is important to retain this insight, it under-theorises the interplay between buyer-led standards and other localised values.

FVCT is combining two often competing, local sets of ethics: those of the *fynmense* (fynbos people—conservationists) and local communities (concerned with livelihoods, rooted in developmental imperatives of South Africa such as Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment and economic growth agendas). FVCT has socio-economic objectives of empowering people by promoting both the sustainable and profitable utilisation of natural resources and building skills of employees in the farming and conservation sectors. These objectives are necessarily interwoven in contemporary South Africa where, because of the imbrication of conservation with colonialism and apartheid, "conserving biodiversity and progressively realising rights of all citizens are now expected to be mutually reinforcing" (Crane *et al.*, 2009: 145). The diverse ethics framing FVCT's work are thus influenced both by ecological agendas to protect the *fynbos* and by imperatives to create employment and develop markets through globalised production networks. In addition to some 150 workers gaining employment through the sustainable harvesting supply network, FVCT also develops and implements sustainable harvesting training programmes for the workers which, while currently delivered in Afrikaans and English, are also being translated at the time of writing into isiXhosa for many of the Eastern Cape migrant workers employed in the sector. The organisation is also currently developing a landscape management course in partnership with the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI) and the local Green Futures Horticultural and Life Skills College.

FVCT's work on empowerment is particularly important in the context of a region marked by racialised patterns of poverty shaped by legacies of colonialism and apartheid. The Agulhas Plain is a privatised landscape where 80% of the land is owned by white landowners. Although irreversibly influenced by colonialism, to suggest that present forms of sustainable

harvesting are a simple re-articulation of previous colonial regulatory attempts misses the transformative capacity of present transnational political and scientific relations and the cross-cultural processes shaping them. FVCT's sustainable wildflower harvesting programme is intended to be a break with the problematic past of conservation and aims to set a new tone across the wildflower industry. So while questions continue regarding poor people's current access to sustainably harvested flowers, FVCT has sought explicitly to widen participation in harvesting to include people from historically marginalised groups. One of the impacts of the sustainable harvesting programme, for example, has also been to re-open some areas of public land for harvesting. The Overberg Test Range, where picking was previously banned due to ecological damage, now allows harvesting by accredited picking teams. Similarly, CapeNature is seeking to grant harvesting permits for sour figs and medicinal plants with the express intention of bringing poorer, landless people into the sustainable harvesting realm rather than criminalising them for poaching.[9] FVCT, despite working within capitalist market and production relations, is attempting to shift—albeit in modest ways—some of the class/race/gender structures through empowerment and job creation (capacity building and training). Although it is limited in its capacity to affect land redistribution, FVCT's efforts around the Overberg Test Range are noteworthy and resonate with Chari's (2010) and Hart's (2004) much broader arguments about the importance of understanding and encouraging inclusionary rights to common means of life within landscapes of entrenched exclusion. With significance for re-theorising GPNs, it points to the active role of FVCT in localised articulations of wildflower harvesting networks, and it demonstrates the importance of a historically and geographically-sensitive perspective in illuminating the cultural politics of this GPN.

[9] CapeNature Manager, personal communication, February 2013.

6. Conclusion

This paper initiates dialogue between postcolonial approaches and GVC/GPN conceptual frameworks. It suggests that such dialogue offers a potentially fruitful pathway for developing more culturally-sensitive accounts of GVCs and GPNs. It neither adjudicates between these approaches, nor suggests that they be replaced by an alternative conceptual framework. Rather, it works with existing concepts—in particular, institutional context and hybridity—and develops these through critical conversation.

The paper demonstrates some of the potential ways in which a combination of postcolonial and political-economic lenses might illuminate important historically-sensitive narratives of the institutional dimensions of global supply chains. It attempts to build on the work of heterodox economists who have begun to engage with postcolonial theory, challenging economic concepts, highlighting the significance of place and breaking down dualisms such as culture/economy and tradition/modernity. It proposes that GVC/GPN approaches could prosper from such dialogue. Equally, postcolonial theory, which has tended to marginalise theorisation of 'the economic' (Pollard et al., 2009), is enriched by conversation with political-economic frameworks. While GVC/GPN approaches address some important questions about power and authority in supply networks, they marginalise the role of cultural politics and histories in shaping these networks. At the same time, postcolonial and historical narratives of commodities and commoditisation tend not to make associations with contemporary economic articulations. There is, therefore, much to be gained analytically and politically from drawing such lines of connection, including engagement with more culturally-sensitive accounts of the winners and losers in global supply networks than are captured by current GVC/GPN theorisation of economic and social upgrading.

The paper argues for a replacement of GPN concepts of embeddedness with a postcolonial-economic notion of institutional hybridity for three key reasons. First, using the example of the sustainable *fynbos* harvesting network, the paper challenges the tripartite conceptualisation of 'territorial', 'network' and 'societal' embeddedness by exploring the multiple, cross-cultural, historically-rooted connections and flows that constitute this sector. Second, by exploring how FVCT and Fynsa are positioned at the intersection of a wide range of organisations working to construct and apply rules, regulations and ethics concerned with conservation, markets and labour, it counters the tendency of GPN framings to focus network embeddedness almost exclusively on lead firms. Instead, multiple intersections are understood to form firm and non-firm actors and to generate wider norms and values. Third, by exploring the historical dimensions of culture and multiple contemporary political-economic imperatives that shape the institutions and codes constituting sustainable wildflower harvesting, the paper contests the notion of societal embeddedness, highlighting the ways in which firms and organisations involved in the sustainable wildflower harvesting network are always and already hybridised.

Bringing both the recent institutional and longer environmental histories to bear on an analysis of sustainable *fynbos* harvesting and its globalising supply networks illuminates ways in which some key threads of contemporary sustainable harvesting and its markets have come to be—from the identification, conservation and commoditisation of *fynbos,* to specific methods for its protection. Current production networks based on sustainable harvesting and ethically-promoted, luxury bouquets sold through supermarkets and high street retailers have been forged out of much earlier colonial encounters, as well as the ongoing confluence of (and sometimes tensions between) market-making and conservation. The hybridisation of

relatively recent political-economic projects of private interest regulation with changing environmental and socio-economic ethicalities in South Africa also is significant. And following Zein-Elabdin (2011), the precise ways in which FVCT translates the values and knowledges of its wide-ranging networks are ever-changing.

Drawing on Bhabha (1994), Zein-Elabdin (2009: 1155, original emphasis) argues that "...*hybridity* (deep cultural mixing) offers a fruitful analytical tool for better examining economies situated in multiple and dense cross-cultural intersections". This paper has explored this explanatory potential in the case of sustainable wildflower harvesting in the Western Cape, recognising institutional hybridity as integral to the governance of global supply networks. Colonial encounters are shown through historical and postcolonial narratives to sit at the very heart of some of the problematic ways in which *fynbos* has been and continues to be commoditised, a point which is easily missed through standard GVC/GPN readings. At the same time, GVC/GPN analysis alerts us to the powerful ways in which corporate buyers drive the current supply chain practices that have been shaped by these encounters. A move to combine such insights through the notion of institutional hybridity is, we suggest, applicable not only to South-North production networks but also to a far wider set of production networks, be they North-North, North-South or, increasingly, South-South. Such a perspective advances culturally-sensitive accounts of global supply networks and their continual transformation.

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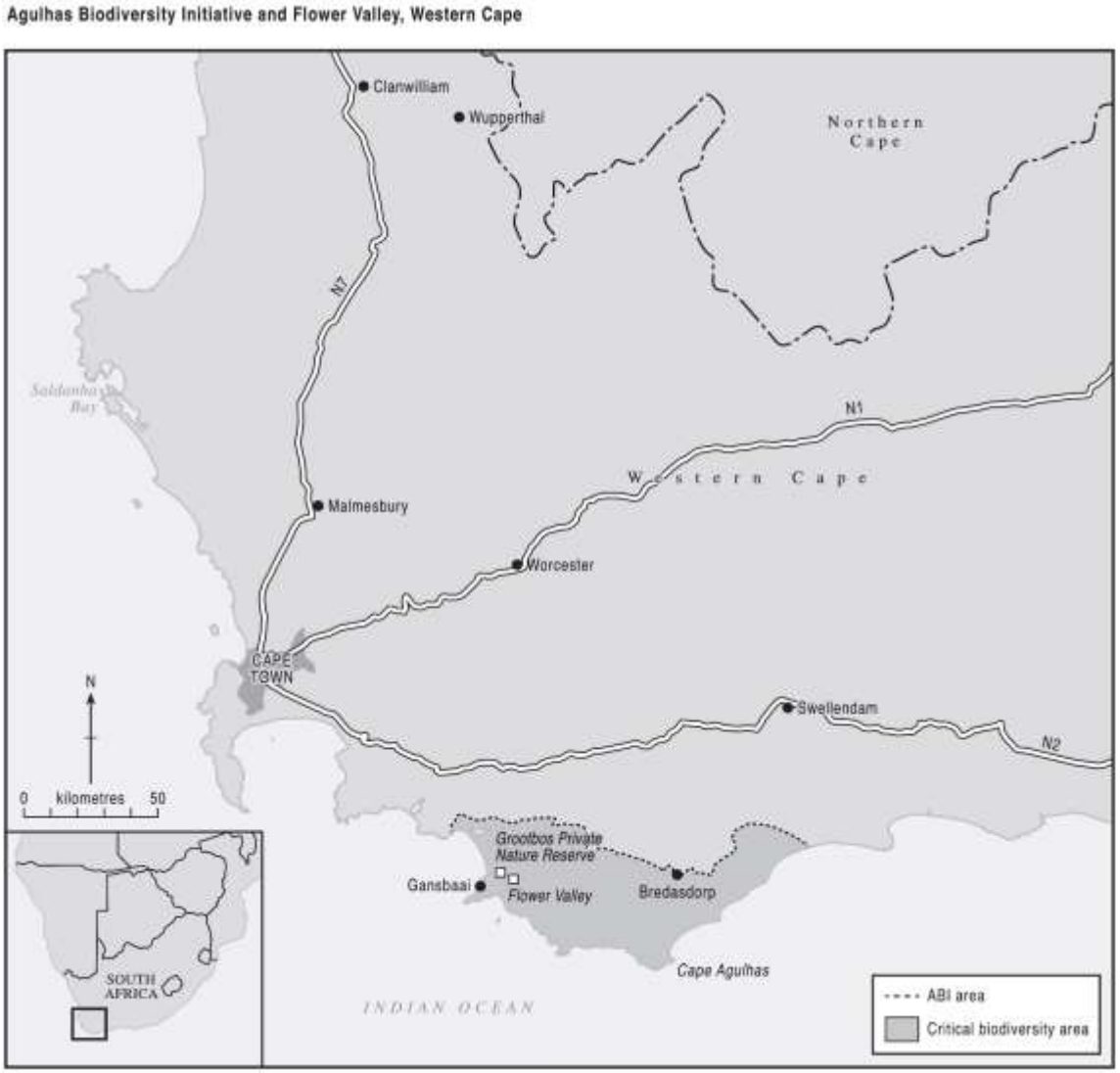
Figure 1


Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative and Flower Valley, Western Cape
Clanwilliam
Wuppertal
Northern Cape
N7
Saldanha Bay
N1
Western Cape
Malmesbury
Worcester
CAPE TOWN
N
0 kilometres 50
Swellendam
N2
Grootbos Private Nature Reserve
Gansbaai
Flower Valley
Bredasdorp
Cape Agulhas
SOUTH AFRICA
INDIAN OCEAN
ABI area
Critical biodiversity area